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ABSTRACT

Some potential areas of inquiry into the field of cross-national study of early childhood education are described in relation to the history and aims of the World Organization for Early Childhood Education (OMEP). Currently the largest international organization concerned with preschool education, OMEP is presented with specific recommendations: (1) that members, possibly by regions, select and focus on one country or region, (2) that OMEP establish organizational linkages with other groups working in the area of cross-national studies, and (3) that OMEP foster the goal of cross-national studies as understanding and development of the field, rather than for purposes of comparison and criticism. Need is seen for developing systematic descriptive frameworks for organizing inquiry and for observing programs. Some neglected areas are: cross-national study of policy formation; observation of teacher-child, child-child and child-material interaction in programs; and the study of regional and ethnic cultural variations and educational beliefs and practices where there is no homogeneous national pattern. It is stressed that observations of teacher practices and children's behavior be interpreted within the goals and concepts of the particular culture and society. (Author/BF)

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CROSS-NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION:

ENGAGING IN INQUIRY¹

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When the World Organization for Early Childhood Education (O.M.E.P.) was founded in 1948, its stated aim was "to promote the study and education of young children in all countries and so foster happy childhood and home life and thereby contribute to world peace" (Article II, No. 1). O.M.E.P.'s activities from the very beginning had a distinct cross-national character: "to collect and disseminate information (on early education) (Article III, No. 2); to promote study and research related to early childhood education (Article III, No. 3); to sponsor international seminars and post-graduate training for teachers (Article III, No. 7); to prepare international conventions embodying standards in early education (Article III, NO. 8); to establish working relationships with appropriate world organizations (Article III, No. 10); and to aid in achieving direct links and personal contacts between all members in different countries" (Article III, No. 11).

In the 28 years since O.M.E.P.'s beginnings in Prague, cross-national studies in early childhood education has virtually become a field of scholarly and interdisciplinary inquiry. Within the last 10 years, there have been major efforts to study early child care and education: the International Monograph Series on Early Child Care edited by Halbert Robinson and Nancy M. Robinson; the Early Schooling

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Series from the Institute for the Development of Educational Activities (/I/D/E/A/); Gilbert Austin's series on early education in European countries; the Council of Europe's conferences and monographs on problems and research on preschool education in Europe; and countless other conferences and research programs. The study tour to the People's Republic of China, Scandinavia, and other countries is also a popular form of cross-national exchange in early education. Individual visits--both of short- and long-term duration--continue to be a valuable opportunity to observe early education in action.

O.M.E.P. is currently the largest international organization concerned with the education of children below the age of compulsory schooling. It has members and national committees in more than 40 countries throughout the world. Thus, the focus of today's presentation--in the context of O.M.E.P.'s history and aims and the burgeoning field of cross-national studies--is to describe some potential areas for engaging in inquiry. The purpose is to engage early educators and others who really know the field to contribute to cross-national inquiry. Finally, I conclude the presentation with three specific recommendations to O.M.E.P. regarding its role in cross-national inquiry in early education.

The Need for Descriptive Frameworks

In most of the descriptive work on cross-national studies of early education, the framework(s) which organizes the inquiry is often left implicit. Typically, the professional and disciplinary training of the researcher influences what is seen and what is chosen for presentation. Hence, a critical problem in cross-national inquiry lies in the formation of frameworks which systematize the description of the history,

socio-cultural context, images of children and families, teacher training, family socialization practices as well as of children's experiences in programs.

Perhaps one task which O.M.E.P. along with other workers might undertake is the development of guidelines for the systematic study of early childhood programs in cross-national perspective so that there will be common, identified areas for conducting cross-national studies. Such frameworks might also insure that descriptive accounts are "balanced" to include a variety of ways of looking at programs, rather than reflecting a narrow focus or interest of the individual. The identification of common areas might also facilitate exchange of information among workers in the field.

Cross-National Studies of Policy Formation

The early education and care of children has only recently been recognized as a political problem involving social values and philosophy, economic realities, and national priorities. Images of children and families shape the goals of education and the questions of how, when, and where to intervene (or not to intervene) in children's lives. These images are part of the social milieu of programs, and affect the kinds of educational experiences children receive in them. Often, too, there are gaps between expressed social goals and actual program practices. Thus, one area for cross-national inquiry is to examine the dynamics and politics of program planning and implementation.

The Need for In-Depth, Systematic Observations of Programs

We have many descriptive accounts of early education programs

worldwide. Reading these accounts of early education programs, one is struck by the similarities in descriptions of daily schedules, programs, goals, and content. Children in early education programs worldwide draw, paint, dance, sing, and learn about nature and group life. Play is considered to be central to the total curriculum which ideally aims at discovery and independence. The imperative for the teacher is to be warm, supportive, and facilitative of children's development. To some extent, this similarity is due to the fact that current practice has been influenced by Comenius, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Montessori, and native educators who derived their principles from these educators. However, we have almost no cross-national data based on systematic observations on actual teacher-child, child-child, and child-material interaction in programs. With the development of observational systems to document early education practice in the U.S., perhaps similar systems could be developed in other countries to document what happens in programs with greater reliability and objectivity. It is possible that such observations may reveal subtle, but significant differences in curriculum, practice, and outcomes which are not evident from present descriptions.

We assume that families rear their children differently in different countries. Should we not also assume that children have different experiences in early education programs cross-nationally? At this point in time, we do not have good evidence either to support the claim of similarity or differences in programs, and whether programs have different effects on children in different countries.

Acknowledging the need for systematic observations, allow me to interject some reservations. Cross-national researchers face the task of developing methods which can be used for the systematic observation

of children's programs. Yet, in doing so, we must be cautious in assuming that similar events or objects have similar meanings for individuals both in different cultures or even within the same culture. For example, what may appear to Americans to be highly regimented daily activities in the Asian preschool setting may be as important a socialization goal of Asian teachers as the development of individuality is to American teachers. In Hong Kong and in the People's Republic of China, children perform highly intricate dances and often accompanied by group singing. Some American observers may label these activities as highly structured, meaning that they are initiated and directed by the teacher and follow prescribed, step by step renditions of movements and language. These activities may be seen as nonsupportive of free play, creativity, and independence which we highly value. However, in the context of Chinese culture, the mastery of these traditional arts among the young is integrally tied to societal definitions of desired competencies.

Another example comes from my examinations of Asian early education. American early education places a great deal of emphasis on the uniqueness and individuality of the child. In some of the Asian countries, notably Japan and Hong Kong, children are often grouped for activities--and in large groups at that. Thus it may be easier to observe that the Japanese preschool does not promote "individuality" as evidenced by the lack of emphasis on independent activities and time for "being alone." However, when the group activities are viewed within the specific societal and cultural context, learning to live in crowds and as part of a group oriented society may be very critical as far as the anticipatory socialization of the Japanese child.

A further caution is that definitions of similar terms such as

INDEPENDENCE, SELF RELIANCE, CREATIVITY and FREE PLAY may be imbued with different meanings in each country. Hence, in future cross-national studies of early education, an exploration of the meaning of preschool goals needs to be undertaken. Translation of words may only be the first step. Again, in my work on Asian early education, I puzzled over the similarities in stated goals of early education and wondered how they were actualized in the classroom and in the child's own experiences. Goals of early education become operationalized through the teacher's interpretations of the society and of the role which children in the society must master in order to become contributing adult members. Cross-national inquiry must be directed toward these interpretations of teachers, and toward systematic observations of "what teachers do" in day-to-day interactions with children.

To summarize, then, observations and interpretations of teacher practices and children's behavior must be interpreted within the goals of the particular culture and society. This point cannot be overemphasized. Once we see the behavior of teachers and children as adaptations to the needs of the culture and the society, we may be less judgmental and more cautious about stamping our observations with our own values given our OWN particular social and cultural perspectives.

Another caution is to avoid generalizing about early education based on visits to a small number of programs in one country. We need to examine the diversity of early education programs in the country. A common omission in cross-national inquiry is the study of regional ethnic, and cultural variations and related beliefs and practices in early education. In fact, it may not be possible to speak about a "national" pattern or as a homogeneous entity. Our observations, at

this very early stage of the field, need to be prefaced by the statement: "Based on our visits to X...programs for Y period of time in the fall of 1976, we found that..." If we can remember this qualification, we will begin to describe and document variations in programs in the same community, region, and country, and contribute considerably to a deeper understanding of early education in cross-national perspectives.

Lee Cronbach's recent thinking on research on educational programs is relevant here. Cronbach notes that a "realizable aspiration for social science is to pin down contemporary fact," that is, to study carefully each program taking into account factors unique to that situation. Instead of aiming for generalizability of our findings, we must use them as hypothesis to approach new situations or programs. The promise of intensive studies is that we come to understand the factors which support early education programs and those which obstruct their development.

Some Recommendations for Organizing Cross-National Inquiry

1. O.M.E.P. members, possibly by regions, select and focus on early childhood education in one country or region depending upon the status of early education in the area. Formal linkages between regions could be established with the national O.M.E.P. committees of the countries as the linkage system.

This recommendation is based on the necessity for long-term, sustained exchange and inquiry in understanding early education programs in their specific historical, community, and socio-cultural context. Individuals from participating countries could be involved in studying programs in each other's countries, and in validating their observations over a number of years.

2. O.M.E.P. as an organization establish linkages with other groups working in the area of cross-national studies of early education.

As was mentioned earlier in the presentation, cross-national studies of early education is an expanding field of inquiry, engaging individuals in educational research, developmental psychology, social work, and the medical professions. There are a number of approaches and methods. Exchange of ideas between O.M.E.P. and these individuals is essential to the continuing development and vitality of this organization.

3. O.M.E.P. foster the goal of cross-national studies as understanding and development of the field, rather than for purposes of comparison and criticism.

In cross-national studies we often focus on exemplary programs, using them to compare with our own programs. The goal of cross-national studies should be the in-depth examination of a diversity of programs within countries in order to understand HOW and WHY programs work, and to suggest ways by which early childhood programs--even the most exemplary ones--can engage in inquiry, evaluation, and continuous development.

There are exciting and great possibilities for all of us to engage in cross-national inquiry on early childhood education. As individuals who are involved with children in a variety of programs and roles, we can contribute perspectives often lacking in cross-national studies. We can all be involved in contributing to this field--in the context of

new knowledge, new approaches and methods of study, and the expansion of the early education field. We need to engage in inquiry in ways which reaffirm the original aims and activities of O.M.E.P.--"to promote the study and education of young children in all countries and so foster happy childhood and home life and thereby contribute to world peace." By engaging in inquiry, we also re-contact our historical roots--that individuals who work for the welfare and development of children must combine action with inquiry.

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